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SOME MINOR GENRES OF OBSCENE FOLKLORE

FOLKLORISTS have finally recognized that the study of oral tradition must include serious consideration of obscene material.¹ Attention has been drawn to off-color variants of the major folklore genres, such as folktales and folksongs. However, there are a number of folkloristic forms circulating widely in American oral tradition in which obscenity is more often the rule than the exception.² These minor genres are generally characterized by set opening formulas, such as "Confucius say," "She was only the ——'s daughter," and "What's the difference between." The salacious nature of these genres is frequently so well-known—at least among male audiences—that the mere utterance of the opening formula prepares the listener for what is to come. Because these forms are so often concerned with obscene material, they have received little attention from folklorists. Yet since so much of traditional American obscenity is carried in these genres, no consideration of the obscene should exclude them.

A discussion of six of these minor genres will serve to illustrate the nature and strength of the obscene tradition. They are (1) Punning Rhetorical Questions, (2) Spooneristic Conundrums, (3) Wanton Daughter Puns, (4) Confucianisms, (5) Depraved Definitions, and (6) Bawdy Book Titles. Structurally each of these genres is binary. The first structural segment presents a situation which is usually nonobscene. For example, the title of the book by itself is entirely innocuous. The second structural segment is either obscene in itself or else it renders the first segment obscene.³ *The Happy Honeymooners*, as a book title, is unobjectionable. However, once the second segment, the names of the coauthors Maud Fitz-Gerald and Gerald Fitz-Maud, has been introduced, the meaning of the first segment is altered.

The second structural segment often causes surprise, an element usually found in obscene folklore and in jokelore in general.⁴ Frequently, the second element is ambiguous with the ambiguity resulting from a shift in what linguists term *juncture*.⁵ For example, the first segment of "Did you know that most Greek wives get a divorce" is followed by the ambiguous second segment of "because their husbands are indifferent." The ambiguity occurs because of the two junctural possibilities for the last word. If there is close juncture after the prefix *in-*, there is no obscenity. However, since the speaker uses open juncture, making the two words *in* and *different*, the obscenity results.

The ambiguity of the second segment may also be caused by a pun. One type of pun involves homonymity, e.g., *The Open Kimono* by Seymour Hare. Another type utilizes two homomorphic forms with identical orthography, such as, "Did you hear about the plastic surgeon that hung himself?" The frequent use of juncture and pun will become apparent in the examples which follow.

PUNNING RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

In this genre, the first structural segment consists of a purely rhetorical question,

often beginning with the initial formula "Did you hear about . . . ?"⁶ The second segment, the obscene-converting one, may be an entirely separate statement appended to the first; or it may be one or more words contained in the question—frequently at the end.

1. Did you hear about the cross-eyed seamstress who couldn't mend straight?
2. Did you hear about the cannibal that passed his best friend in the jungle?
3. Did you hear about the goose that stepped into the elevator and got peopled?
4. Did you hear about the Arabs that went queer? They were sitting under a tree eating their dates.
5. Did you hear about the little Greek boy that left home because he didn't like the way his father reared him?
6. Did you hear about the little Greek boy who cried and cried when he left home because he hated to leave his brothers behind?
7. Did you hear about the Greek who decided to give up his love life? It was starting to be a pain in the ass.⁷

SPONNERISTIC CONUNDRUMS

The initial segment of this genre asks for a comparison between two greatly dissimilar items. The common opening formula is "What's the difference between. . ."⁸ The question is patently absurd inasmuch as there are innumerable differences between the items. In fact, in a stag audience which is familiar with this genre, the listener is more likely to seek a similarity, which however farfetched will be contained in the second segment.⁹ The feigned difference often plays upon the spooneristic avoidance of a taboo word. Just as it is common in America to refrain from using obscene words in print, so euphemism and bowdlerization frequently occur in oral tradition, although to a much lesser extent.¹⁰ It is interesting that so many examples of this genre depend upon these verbal taboos for their wit.

8. What's the difference between a nun and a girl in a bathtub? The nun has hope in her soul.
9. What's the difference between a lawyer and an angry hen? An angry hen clucks defiance.
10. What's the difference between a chorus girl during the day and a chorus girl at night? A chorus girl during the day is fair and buxom.
11. What's the difference between a circus and a burlesque? A circus is a cunning array of stunts.
12. What's the difference between a group of female pigmies and a woman's basketball team? The female pigmies are a cunning bunch of runts.
13. What's the difference between a woman and a prize fighter? The prize fighter gets up to get knocked down.
14. What's the difference between war and peace? Did you ever hear of a good war?¹¹

WANTON DAUGHTER PUNS

The first structural segment is built on the formula "She was only the ——'s daughter," while the second segment is introduced by the conjunction "but."¹² Unlike the Spooneristic Conundrum, this well-known joke type is almost completely dependent upon juncture and pun.

15. She was only the stablekeeper's daughter, but all the horsemen knew 'er.

16. She was only the lumberman's daughter; that's why she always wood.
17. She was only the butler's daughter, but oh how she wanted to be maid.
18. She was only the florist's daughter, but she was a dandelion in the grass.
19. She was only a Hawaiian's daughter, but you should have seen her lei.
20. She was only a fisherman's daughter, but when she saw my rod she reeled.
21. She was only a wrestler's daughter, but you ought to see her box.
22. She was only the policeman's daughter, but she liked to go where the dicks hung out.

CONFUCIANISMS

This is probably one of the most widespread of the minor genres of obscene folklore.¹³ It is undoubtedly familiar to those folklorists who have sampled the full gamut of American oral tradition. In the main, this genre follows the binary structural pattern in that the initial statement of condition or situation is followed by a punning obscenity. Occasionally, however, an obscene element does occur in the first segment. Stylistically, this genre is of particular interest. Since proverbs traditionally contain elements of wisdom, the couching of sexual obscenity—often concerning the place where intercourse takes place—in pseudoproverbial form makes the humor all the more piquant. The fact that the wisdom is attributed to Confucius, the well-known Chinese philosopher, heightens the effect.

23. Confucius say, "Modern house without toilet uncanny."
24. Confucius say, "Man who f---ts in church sits in own pew."
25. Confucius say, "Man who argue with wife all day have no peace at night."
26. Confucius say, "Man who lay woman on ground have peace on earth."
27. Confucius say, "Man who screw girl in graveyard is f-----g near dead."
28. Confucius say, "He who screws in strawberry patch get ass in jam."
29. Confucius say, "Seven days on honeymoon make one whole week."
30. Confucius say, "Man who dates flat-chested girl have right to feel low down."
31. Confucius say, "He who go to bed with sex problem on mind wake up with solution in hand."¹⁴

DEPRAVED DEFINITIONS

The two structural segments of this genre are the item to be defined and the definition. In cases where the item to be defined is not specifically stated, the definition may consist of an exemplification. Three characteristic introductory formulas are (1) "What's (Who's) the _____est thing in the world?" (2) "What's the height of _____?" (3) "What's _____?"

32. What's the quietest thing in the world? A mosquito urinating on a blotter.
33. What's the noisest thing in the world? Two skeletons wearing armor f-----g on a tin roof (in a hailstorm).
34. Who's the bravest man in the world? The peanut vendor, because he whistles while his nuts are roasting.
35. What's the height of ecstasy? Two old maids playing stoop tag in a dewy asparagus patch.
36. What's the height of dexterity? A man with boxing gloves on picking crabs off his b----s.¹⁵
37. What's *adultery*? Two wrong people doing the right thing.
38. What's a *kiss*? Uptown shopping for downtown business, or upper persuasion for lower invasion.

39. What's *Mother's Day*? Nine months after father's day (night).
40. What's a *minute man*? A man who double parks in front of a house of ill repute.
41. What's a *psychiatrist*? A man who tries to find out if infants have more fun in infancy than adults have in adultery.
42. What're *triplets*? Taking seriously what has been poked at you in fun.
43. What's *virgin wool*? A sheep that can run faster than the shepherd.

BAWDY BOOK TITLES

This is one of the most simply structured of the minor genres of obscene folklore and has been discussed above.

44. *The African Maid* by Erasmus B. Black.
45. *The Two Happiest Men in the Navy* by John Fitz-Patrick and Patrick Fitz-John.
46. *The Tiger's Revenge* by Claude Balls.
47. *The Yellow (Golden, Rushing) Stream* by I. P. Daly (Freely, Long).
48. *The Worried Maiden* by Mister (Pastor) Period.
49. *Greek Paradise* by Ash Soules.
50. *Peace at Dawn* by Earl E. Ryser.
51. *The Easiest Way* by Eileen Back.
52. *Chinese Pervert* by Peiping Tom.
53. *The Spots on the Wall* by Hu Flung Dung.
54. *The Ruptured Chinaman (Trail in the Sand)* by Wun Hung Low.¹⁶

These are just a few examples, intended merely to sample the tradition.¹⁷ More collecting should be done, and the materials should be made available through folklore archives, if not in print. It needs to be emphasized that these genres should *not* be collected simply because they are obscene. Rather they are needed to put into practice the theory that a complete study of folklore *must* include *all* genres. It is noteworthy that none of the standard printed collections of American folklore include specimens of this vigorous tradition. Yet these genres, unlike all the major ones, exist almost solely in oral rather than in both oral and written tradition. They could not survive without oral transmission. In fact, it is highly probable that if one were to ask a random number of informants—say 100—to sing a Child ballad learned from oral tradition, to recite an international folktale not learned from print, and to tell a joke which belongs to one of the six genres mentioned above, the results would be disappointing for the first two but overwhelmingly successful for the last. For while tale-tellers and balladsingers become more difficult to find among the folk in America today, people who transmit and listen to these minor genres of obscene folklore become more numerous.

NOTES

1. One sign of this recognition was the American Folklore Society's decision to devote a session of its annual meeting in December 1960 in Philadelphia to a discussion of obscenities in folklore.

2. The Negro toast, recently studied by Roger Abrahams and reported during the meeting mentioned in n. 1 above, is an example of one such minor genre.

The minor forms discussed in the present study do not appear to be included in Archer Taylor's definition of the riddle. See Archer Taylor, "The Riddle," *California Folklore Quarterly*, II (1943), 129-147, and *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley, 1951), p. 1.

3. The label "obscene" is a culturally relative term. As Allen Walker Read has aptly pointed

out, "a word is obscene not because the thing named is obscene, but because the speaker or hearer regards it, owing to the interference of a taboo, with a sneaking, shamefaced, psychopathic attitude." ("The Nature of Obscenity," *Neurotica*, V, 1949, 23-30.)

4. Martha Wolfenstein in her stimulating book *Children's Humor* (Glencoe, Ill., 1954), in which she considers such genres as the little moron jokes and shaggy-dog stories, makes this point: "The alternation between concealing and revealing is a major aspect of jokes. A joke has a point which must first be concealed and then exposed" (p. 170).

The structure of these six genres differs from that of pretended-obscene riddles, in which the apparently obscene element is introduced initially. The second segment serves to render innocuous the entire form. For instance, "What four-letter word begins with *f* and ends with *k*, and if it doesn't work you can use your fingers?" The answer is *fork*. Most riddle collections contain a number of pretended-obscene riddles. See, for example, Arthur Huff Fauset, "Tales and Riddles Collected in Philadelphia," *Journal of American Folklore*, XLI (1928), 557, nos. 45, 46, 47; and Ralph Steele Boggs, "North Carolina White Folktales and Riddles," *JAF*, XLVII (1934), 320-324, nos. 1, 3, 7, 11, 14, 16, 17, 18.

5. Many linguists have discussed juncture. See, for example, George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr., *An Outline of English Structure* (Washington, 1957), pp. 39-50.

Ambiguity is a form of cleverness, and as G. Legman has pointed out, some people will not listen to risqué jokes unless they are clever. He comments: "'Clever' means that all taboo words and graphic descriptions will be avoided in the telling, thus allowing the listener either to accept, or (by not laughing or 'not understanding') to refuse to accept, the intimacy of any particular *double entendre*." (G. Legman, "Rationale of the Dirty Joke," *Neurotica*, IX, 1952, 49.) Freud also comments on the fact that in the more refined social strata, obscenity must be witty to be tolerated. See *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. A. A. Brill (New York, 1938), p. 696.

6. Wolfenstein (cf. n. 4) suggests that the difference between the joking question and the riddle is that the former does not require an answer (p. 148).

7. There appears to be a definite *blason populaire* tradition about Greeks and their supposed penchant for sodomy. For example, anal intercourse is often termed in popular parlance "the Greek way." Curiously enough, in present-day Athens, this practice is attributed to the traditional Turkish foe, and the Greek allusion may be loosely translated as "the Ottoman way." While the origin of this tradition is unclear, it is of interest that the ancient Greeks did engage in such practices (cf. also example 47). See "Greek way" in the *Dictionary of American Slang*, ed. Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner (New York, 1960), p. 229, and "Greek love" in Adolph F. Niemoeller, *American Encyclopedia of Sex* (New York, 1935), p. 115.

8. C. Grant Loomis, in his article "Traditional American Wordplay: The Conundrum" (*Western Folklore*, VIII, 1949, 235-247), refers to specimens of this genre as complicated conundrums which "shift the words in a statement to give them an entirely different sense" (p. 245). "Of all the conundrum patterns," he states, "this type is still most frequent in oral circulation, often, to be sure, in *unprintable form*" (p. 245, our italics). Loomis gives 37 examples of these "transpositions," as he calls them (pp. 245-246), most of which are nonobscene.

9. Wolfenstein refers to this genre as "joking riddles" and suggests that they often have to do with sex differences. However, citing the difference between a soldier and a lady as being, "A soldier faces the powder and a lady powders the face," she notes, "While this states a sex difference, it also minimizes it as the soldier and the lady turn out to be surprisingly alike" (p. 111; also cf. p. 179).

In some examples of this genre, it is specifically stated that there is no difference. An example on file at the Institute for Sex Research in Bloomington is "What's the difference between a tight skirt and a mule's ears? None—they both fit the ass well."

10. In oral tradition the ambiguity is not hampered by the problems which arise when the material is presented orthographically. These forms are seldom written down; but when they are, the nonobscene spelling is more common. Consequently, the ambiguity may not be readily apparent because one of the possible meanings has been unduly emphasized. Thus the genre is clearly less effective in print. For further discussion on this point, see Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 246-247.

Since punning obscenities are more effective when spoken, they may be successfully utilized in plays, which though preserved in scripts, are intended to be presented orally. For this reason, Shakespeare's ingenious uses of such puns are less obvious to readers than to those who see and hear the plays performed. See, for instance, the obscene pun on *poperin pear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, III. i. 37-38. For other examples, see Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (New York, 1948).

11. Vance Randolph lists ten of these from oral tradition, including a variant of example 9, in his typewritten manuscript "Obscenity in Ozark Riddles" (1954), on file in the Institute for Sex Research library. Some of these are dated 1932, and one may be found in Vance Randolph and Isabel Spradley, "Ozark Mountain Riddles," *JAF*, XLVII (1934), 86.

There are other examples which do not depend on a sound shift. For instance, one found in the anonymous *Extra Sextra Special* (New York, 1954), reads: "What's the difference between a sweater girl and a sewing machine? A sewing machine has only one bobbin."

12. These are classified as "Occupational Wordplay" by C. Grant Loomis, "Traditional American Wordplay," *WF*, IX (1950), 147-152. Loomis states that this formula "found its first popularity about twenty-five years ago. The nucleus of the idea is a profession or trade which suggests a double use of particularized vocabulary which is customarily associated with a special occupation. The transference of the professional jargon, usually from father to daughter, allows a punning comment about the offspring's manners, morals, or habits" (p. 151). He gives 47 texts culled from *The Pelican*, a University of California humor magazine. Most of the texts (pp. 151-152) are obscene or cleverly suggestive. Included among these are items 15 and 16 in the present study.

13. It is difficult to document this assertion because of the dearth of printed versions. Only one example is included in *Over Sixteen*, ed. J. M. Elgart (New York, 1951), p. 154. One of the sequel volumes, *More Over Sixteen* (New York, 1953), contains 13 examples (p. 104). There are more than 200 examples in the "Folk Epigrams Folder" at the Institute for Sex Research, many of them from Washington, D. C., and dated 1947.

14. It should be pointed out that the genres are not mutually exclusive with regard to content. The same content may be found in more than one of the forms. There are on file at the Institute for Sex Research the following: "Confucius say, 'Big difference between war and peace. Never heard of good war,'" and "Confucius say, 'Man who hate to leave friends behind must be Greek'" (cf. examples 6 and 14). Similarly, definitions often appear as sayings of Confucius. For instance, example 40 is attributed to Confucius in *More Over Sixteen*, p. 104.

15. Two examples of this type of definition are found in *Anecdota Americana* (New York, 1928), p. 7. The height of ambition is given as "a flea climbing up on an elephant's hind leg, with intent to commit rape," while the height of precaution is explained as "an old maid putting a condom on her candle." In *The New Anecdota Americana* (New York, 1944), the height of diplomacy is "to say—on surprising a lady in a bathtub: 'I beg your pardon, sir'" (p. 74). At least the first of these is still in wide circulation, as attested by examples in the Indiana University Folklore Archive and the personal knowledge of the authors.

16. The popularity of this genre is demonstrated by a typewritten manuscript "Songs and Ballads (Folk Material and Old Favorites)" of materials taken from oral tradition, compiled by Kenneth Larson, an Idaho schoolteacher. In this manuscript, which is on file in the Indiana University Folklore Archive, there are 310 examples of bawdy book titles. Thirteen book titles are contained in *Anecdota Americana* (New York, 1928), p. 187, whose date of publication provides a useful *terminus ante quem*.

Among the material on file in the Institute for Sex Research Archive is a small collection of miniature booklets which are about two inches square and which have blank pages inside. A book title and an author's name appear on the outside front covers.

17. The examples cited in this study were taken from the following sources:

(1) Collected by Alan Dundes on 12 June 1960 from L. M., a 44-year-old machinist presently living in Sacramento, California, and working for the Southern Pacific Railroad, but originally from Altoona, Pennsylvania: Examples 4, 5, 6, 7, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43.

(2) Known to one or both of the authors from a variety of oral sources: Examples 1, 2, 3, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 20, 33, 34, 35, 45, 46, 47.

(3) Collected by Alan Dundes from Richard M. Dorson, Indiana University, in March 1962: Example 10.

(4) Found in the Institute for Sex Research Archive in manuscript collections: Examples 29, 36, 51.

(5) Found in the Indiana University Folklore Archive in student collections from Michigan State and Indiana Universities: Examples 8, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 44, 48, 49, 50, 52, 53, 54.

Parallel examples are contained in the following printed sources:

(1) *Anecdota Americana, Second Series* (New York, 1934), for examples 8 (p. 93), 6 (p. 135), and an interesting parallel for 33 (pp. 200-201), in which the initial question, "What is the height of noise," shows that the opening formulas for definitions are interchangeable.

(2) *More Over Sixteen*, ed. J. M. Elgart (New York, 1953), for examples 45 (p. 74) and 41 (p. 175).

Examples similar to those cited here and represented in the six genres discussed are also found in these works.

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